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SUBJECT: 30 YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF GRENADA'S COUP D'ETAT

11. (SBU) Summary: March 13, 2009 marks the 30th anniversary of the 1979 coup led by Maurice Bishop that started Grenada down its four year revolutionary path. Radio and television stations are dusting off old footage of Maurice Bishop's fiery speeches. An apparent trial balloon to gauge public reaction to a possible release from prison of the remaining members of the 'Grenada 17' failed due to public backlash. The government in late February fumbled the announcement that the Point Salines International Airport will be renamed the Maurice Bishop International Airport. Public reaction has been decidedly mixed. Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was assassinated on October 19, 1983, bringing to an end Grenada's brief flirtation with revolution. End summary.

Revolutionary Anniversary

12. (SBU) This year's observance of the 30th anniversary of the March 13, 1979 coup that toppled Prime Minister Eric Gairy's government has been more openly pro-revolution than in previous years. The current National Democratic Congress (NDC) government has more former revolutionaries in politically sensitive and powerful positions than previous New National Party governments did. Several mainstream radio and television stations have been playing old footage of Bishop addressing Grenadians. Normally only one local radio station focuses much attention on this anniversary by playing Bishop's speeches all day on the thirteenth. Grenada Broadcast Network (GBN) framed their March 10 presentation as demonstrating that Bishop's words hold solutions for today's crises, including the global economic downturn (after which they played a segment of Bishop arguing that taking power by force was legitimate and justified by what happened to Chile's Allende after he was legitimately elected). With Bishop's co-ruler, Bernard Coard, still in prison, the pro-Bishop faction is getting a virtually free run to promote Bishop as the savior of Grenada, cruelly cut down in his prime.

13. (SBU) Several prominent Grenadians have pointed out publically that Bishop was no saint and that he was responsible for the imprisonment of over 3000 (about 3 percent of the Grenada's population of around 90,000 at the time), as well as the deaths and disappearances of an unknown number of Grenadians during the four year revolution. One contact told the Charge d'Affaires that shortly after the revolutionaries took power, his mother was warned by Bishop to flee Grenada after he signed the order to have her and members of her family killed. As a nurse, she had cared for Bishop when he was badly beaten in the 70's by members of Grenada's army, on orders of the Gairy government. The family left the country within days for Port of Spain and only returned to Grenada years after the revolution ended.

Possible Prisoner Release

14. (SBU) The release of Coard and the other nine members of the Grenada 17 who are in Grenada's Richmond Hill prison remains a contentious issue. When an apparent trial balloon about such a release (as part of a larger Independence Day prisoner release) was floated during the week of February 2 by GBN, it was seen by many, both pro- and anti-NDC as the consummation of a secret NDC

campaign pledge to the prisoners to release them quickly. On balance, however, public reaction was negative and within days the government had backed down, denying it ever intended to release any prisoners. The Grenada Bar Association later revealed that five prisoners were actually released on February 9, but none were members of the Grenada 17.

PSIA to be Renamed

15. (SBU) It appears that Grenada's Point Salines International Airport will soon have a new name: the Maurice Bishop International Airport, though local reaction has been decidedly mixed. Grenadians do not talk openly about the history of the revolution. Supporters and opponents continue to jockey over of the proposed name change, as well as over who should get credit for the idea of building an airport at Point Salines. The idea appears to have originated with the Gairy government in the mid-1970's but did not become a reality until Bishop lined up Cuban money and labor. A third group wonders why the name needs to be changed at all, arguing there is nothing wrong with Point Salines International Airport.

16. (SBU) Prime Minister Tillman Thomas hedged his response in a February 24 press conference when asked about the possible name change. However, on the same day Foreign Minister Peter David announced there would be a definite name change during his trip to Cuba. Local press coverage of David's announcement was nearly unanimous that the FM should not have said anything in Havana. Thomas shrugged off being upstaged by his minister, but David's action has revived local rumors that he and Finance Minister Nazim Burke are gunning for the Prime Minister in order to take power themselves. David lost out to Burke in a bid for the deputy political leadership of the NDC, forced by party

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leaders to drop out to avoid an ugly floor fight at the NDC's March 1 convention.

Comment

17. (SBU) Editor of the newsweekly The Grenadian Voice, Leslie Pierre, and lawyer and political gadfly, Lloyd Noel, have raised their voices against the effort to make Maurice Bishop into a martyr. As they point out, he had his good and his bad qualities and was very much a part of the revolutionary attacks on real and perceived enemies. Pierre, who was imprisoned by the Revolutionary Council order signed by Bishop, swore that he will never fly out of an airport named after "that man". Bishop signed off on many of the orders to detain, kill, or otherwise threaten Grenadians who did not do as they were told. By openly flouting Thomas' authority and announcing the airport name change in Havana before the government admitted to Grenadians that it was in the works, Peter David appears to have finally stumbled badly in his urgent quest for political power. Even strong NDC supporters are decrying his actions as a sign of disrespect for the PM. While the conversation has been uncomfortable for many, if it becomes the basis for further sharing of stories of what happened during the 1979-1983 revolution, Grenada could finally put its history into perspective and move forward. The country and many families were split by the political divisions. Willfully ignoring the wounds has not helped the country move forward; rather it has led to repressed anger and continuing feuds that everyone appears to know about, but no one will address.

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